

Bubble City: Chapter 1

Tick. Slip off backpack, place on table, slide out laptop, place in bin. Take out wallet, take out cell phone, take out loose change, place in bin. Face straight forward, wait for signal, walk through slowly, collect stuff. Tock. Jason did not waste time.

At the gate he read a magazine, on the plane he read a book, on the bus he checked his email. He went through familiar motions as if he had cut from them each unnecessary effort. He analyzed every moment of his life with an unsparing critical eye. He walked down hallways with purposeful strides — well, as purposeful as one can be if one is a gangly teenager attempting to carry a duffle bag bigger than oneself.

The woman behind the glass yelled at him as he tried to squeeze the duffle bag through the turnstile. The bus dropped him off five city blocks from his destination. His destination was closed and locked and empty and unfeeling and he was trapped alone carrying everything he owned in a city he barely knew.

A cab sped by.

Trent stood up from his desk. Sometimes he did that. He wasn't going anywhere or signaling something. He just liked standing up and looking out over all that he surveyed. He savored the feeling of being at the pinnacle of achievement. He didn't think he'd ever get tired of that feeling.

Over there was the team he'd hired away from Microsoft with promises of a looser corporate culture and better weather. And over there, the startup he'd acquired after reading about them in one of the industry weblogs—he couldn't recall which—and after hardball negotiations bought them and brought them here. And, over there, the UI designer, helping all the programmers to make their code more friendly. He watched them all working as one smooth harmonious unit.

He sat back down and looked over the day's schedule. First, a staff meeting. He flicked through his PowerPoint one last time and then headed to the conference room to set up the projector. At 9:00 the computers of every employee simultaneously chimed with an on-screen alert announcing that a meeting was supposed to begin. But, as usual, the programmers were so deeply engrossed in their work that they didn't even hear the bell. "Staff meeting," he shouted, but still no one moved. Oh, those programmers. How dedicated!

He walked around the cubicles, pulling headphones off ears to make sure everyone got the news. They got up and followed him to the conference room. God, programmers have such odd dazed looks and slackened jaws. Spending that much time in front of a screen really must be bad for your expression.

Once everyone was settled in the conference room, he flipped to the first slide. "25,000" it proclaimed in white block letters against a stark black background. "25,000" he said out loud, just to hammer the point home. "We have to do better," he said.

"Now I know all of you are working hard. Don't think I don't see the way you all hurry back from lunch exactly at 1 and get back into the groove, typing furiously and shouting." He heard some muffled noises from the back of the room. He smiled; they thought he didn't notice.

"But 25,000 is just not enough. I want 30,000. Alright. The other piece of news is that we've got a new guy coming in today. He's one of the top students from this year's class at MIT, so I'm sure he'll be an amazing addition to the team. I hope you'll all help him get acquainted with the system."

"OK, I guess that's it. Now back to work!" he shouted, and laughed. He loved to keep the mood light.

Back at his desk, he checked the day's schedule. Some phone calls, then a lunch meeting, then a bit of a break so he could put the finishing touches on his spreadsheets, then one more meeting ending right at 5 so he could race out the door to his parked car and head home to his loving wife.

Lazy day. Sarah slid out of bed and tossed on a tshirt and some panties. Her bare feet tip-toed across the wooden floor as she rummaged around the kitchen for something that might be made into a kind of breakfast. Some granola over here. A bit of fruit over there. Just add a bowl and a spoon and you're done.

She ate it at the kitchen counter while flicking through the day's email on her laptop: George, John, Tom, James, Jim — delete, delete, delete, delete, delete. Sigh, no mail again. She checked a couple blogs, splashed some water on her face, threw on pants, and grabbed her skateboard, tossing it out the window. Her bare feet soon followed. She didn't wear shoes.

Dodging traffic on Mission Street ought to be some kind of videogame. Swerving past this street vendor only to dive in front of that old man's cart, then around again past the giggling children and ducking under the flailing arms of their screaming parents. And that was just the sidewalk.

At the office she hurried past the programmer cubicles, their windows streaming last night's YouTube highlights and some networked videogames and the requisite bluster of the Wayne Darnus show. She slid down into her chair and plotted yet another day of how she was going to persuade the programmers to stop making their interfaces so horrible. In other words, another day of dealing with unceasing, uncomprehending rejection.

Wayne woke up happy, as he always did. Then he sat down at his computer to read the news. One hand clicked through each headline, his blood pressure rising at each fresh outrage, while the other hand grabbed handfuls of cereal from the box he kept by the side of his desk. As he crunched through the dry cereal, its sharp edges lacerating his gums, he felt his anger turn to rage until he could no longer contain himself. So he turned on his camera.

He popped open the recording software, making sure he got his nose squarely in its frame, his face so close that spittle would land on the lens. In a world where every teenage kid could stream a live feed of himself having sex to millions, only the most aggressive vlogcasters survived. Wayne was no dummy. He didn't get to be the number seven blog in the TechnoScene rankings by sitting back and offering his *opinions*. No. This was war and every show a battle.

Today's enemy? Newsflip, one of the crummy little online news aggregator sites, which was threatening to write him out of the history books by dumping the technology he'd single-handedly invented, news notation analysis (NNA), and going with some upstart competitor that didn't even bother to have an acronym for a name. Sure, Newsflip was a tiny site in the scheme of things, but if it switched it would set a dangerous precedent.

He pressed the button and watched the light go green. "Gooooooooood morning," he said, with his best attempt at the cheerful voice that Californians love. "I was seriously disheartened to hear about some dangerous changes afoot at Newsflip. The company plans to abandon their users by abandoning their support for NNA. Now longtime viewers will remember how hard we fought to get NNA adopted. And you won: now NNA is used on every major news site, is built into

Windows and Macs, forms the basis of the modern online news ecosystem.

"Newsflip wants to turn their back on all that by getting rid of NNA. They claim they're doing it to make things simpler for users. But how is it simpler for users to get rid of one of the key features that they depend on?

"But frankly, I think the biggest loser if this move goes forward will be Newsflip. Now, I'm not saying that all of you should go out and boycott Newsflip, but as users I do think you should make your opinions heard. I've always said, technology is about the user. Without you, there'd be no technology business. I think Newsflip might need to be reminded of that."

He pressed the button again and the light blinked off. There. That ought to show them.

Tomorrow: [Chapter Two](#)

You should follow me on twitter [here](#).

November 1, 2007